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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 000667

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SUBJECT: ELECTION HERALD 4: EPRDF WINS OROMIYA ELECTIONS BY
KNOCKOUT

REF: ADDIS 596 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The Ambassador's February 25-27 trip to western Oromiya highlighted a deep frustration among opposition supporters, party officials, and candidates, as well as resignation among the general public on the lack of choice for the upcoming local elections in April. This marks a sharp departure from the positive mood and wide participation in the 2005 national elections. In one area in Oromiya, there were 60,955 ruling party candidates running for office in comparison to only seven (7) from the opposition in an area which the opposition carries overwhelmingly in 2005. The persistent and consistent reports of intimidation, arrests of opposition supporters and candidates, and bureaucratic harassment in securing approval from the National Election Board (NEB) offices for opposition candidates to run in the local election underscored for us that local elections will not be competitive and that we should focus resources and energy on the 2010 national elections if we are to mitigate the potential of mounting anger and frustration from turning violent.

¶2. (C) Meetings with ruling and opposition party leaders, local government officials, and National Electoral Board (NEB) officers in Gimbi, Nekempt, and Ambo towns revealed the prevalence of heavy-handed tactics by ruling party (OPDO branch of the EPRDF) cadres which have succeeded in virtually eliminating meaningful political participation by the opposition. The opposition Oromo Federalist Democratic Party (OFDM) and Oromo People's Congress (OPC) have been allowed to field candidates only for less than 0.03% of the seats up for contention. Opposition party members and supporters told us that some live in fear, and that opposition supporters are resigned to the ruling party continuing to dominate the local elections. Ambassador noted that the opposition, for its part, was not well organized and has been prevented from conducting grassroots party building over the past two years.

Given the lack of capacity, the opposition parties decided not to contest any of the local kebele (Ethiopia's smallest administrative unit, of which there are over 15,000 in Ethiopia, each with 100-300 elected seats) assembly seats, focusing rather on woreda and zonal (the next higher sub-regional administrative units) assembly seats. Regrettably, ruling party intimidation and harassment has effectively eliminated even their ability to participate in

these contests. Five weeks before the actual elections, ruling party manipulation has already, de facto, awarded the opposition stronghold of western Oromiya to the ruling party.
End Summary.

GIMBI: DRIVE 'EM OUT

13. (C) Opposition OFDM party officials met the Ambassador on February 25 in the 10 by 15 foot zonal party office which had just been re-opened after a two year forced closure by the regional police. OFDM MP Tesfaye Fufa explained that despite winning six of the zone's eleven parliamentary seats in 2005 -- many by overwhelming majorities in excess of 80% -- he reported that harassment and intimidation by the regional EPRDF component party the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) has led to the OFDM being able to secure commitments only from 20 supporters to run for the over-30,000 seats open to competition in West Wollega's 535 kebeles 19 woredas and two towns. Among these, two abandoned the effort before attempting to register, bureaucratic delays by the local NEB office prevented another five from being able to register, and threats and harassment has prompted three registered candidates to withdraw from the race. The following are examples of tactics employed by ruling OPDO party cadres, according to opposition sources:

--In the 15 days since registering as a woreda candidate, Mulatu Shiferao has been picked-up and detained off the street seven times by OPDO cadres. As the OPDO currently controls the local administration, the cadres each time took Ato Mulatu to the OPDO office and threatened alternately to fire him from his teaching job, to relocate his position to a

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remote rural site, and to kill him and his children.

--OPDO cadres told Shimelis Miru that he would lose his job with the electric power authority unless he withdrew his candidacy for a woreda seat. He refused to do so, and on February 8 assailants fired nine bullets into his house while he, his wife, and children were home. Ato Shimelis reported the incident to the police, but there has been no follow-up to date.

--In July 2006, regional police picked OFDM member Ahmed Ibrahim Negussie up off the street and took him to the police station. His wife Alewiya Sayeet was able to bring him food the following day, but was told by police that they did not know his whereabouts on the second day. She has not seen or heard from him since or received news of any charges against him. Two weeks ago she showed his picture around at the Dedesa military camp, where the Ethiopian Government (GoE) detained 30,000-50,000 opposition supporters after the 2005 national elections, and was told that Ato Ahmed was inside.

--After registering, candidates Ebisab Biratu and Hika Ayama were taken separately by OPDO cadres to the town council and offered bribes if they withdraw or join the OPDO. When they refused, the cadres warned them that by running in the elections they could die.

14. (SBU) Public sentiment in Gimbi appeared overwhelmingly downbeat, with the general public resigned to victory by the ruling party in an area dominated by the opposition in the 2005 national elections. While many opposition supporters note that they will vote their conscience in a secret ballot, party leaders dismiss the impact of such votes due to the near absence of actual opposition candidates and the GoE's control over the appointment of NEB officers who will count the ballots.

NEKEMPT: ROUND 'EM UP

15. (C) On February 26, East Wollega opposition OPC zonal

officers detailed the ruling party's frontal assault on their party. Leery of ruling party intimidation undermining their efforts, zonal OPC officials drew up a list of 189 willing candidates for zonal and woreda seats to propose to the OPC Chairman in Addis Ababa. Party officials sent a party officer to deliver the list in early April. Regional police stopped the bus on which the official was riding 14 kilometers outside of Nekempt town, off-loaded and strip searched the party officer, and confiscated the list. Within days, ruling regional police had picked up and detained every one of the 189 potential OPC candidates, holding most until after candidate registration closed. Ultimately, only one OPC candidate was finally able to register for these local elections despite the OPC's landslide victory in 2005 winning over one million votes. That candidate, Tariku Tolossa, has already been picked-up and detained by regional police who have accused him of being a "squad leader" plotting to kill elected officials and trading in arms. Before releasing him, police and Nekempt city officials threatened to kill him if he reported the incident.

16. (C) Two women, Belainesh Negara and Mamitu Mona, recounted tales of how their OPC member husbands, Taye Guta and Kebede Kadisa respectively, were arrested on January 10 along with six other OPC members while having drinks at a bar owned by an OPC central committee member in Arjo town. According to the ladies, while the eight were socializing someone threw anti-government flyers into the bar followed immediately by the police who arrested the group for possessing "subversive documents." All eight were quickly tried and sentenced to at least four years in jail each. Additionally, Woizero Mamitu told the Ambassador that police officers and the woreda administrator came to her house after her husband's detention telling her that her family would have further problems if she reported the incident. They further told her that her children would be harmed if they play with other kids in the community and threatened to "deal with her" if she even goes to church, funerals, or socializes with others.

17. (C) Opposition OPC leaders claim that while the public is sympathetic to the opposition, the local government and ruling OPDO party cadres have carte blanche to arrest,

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intimidate, rescind business licenses, etc. to impose fear throughout the population. Despite frustration with the ruling party's antics, the OPC did not request the Embassy or international community to demand accountability, but rather for capacity building assistance to build strong and credible democratic national institutions that would prevent such from happening in the future.

THE EPRDF'S VERSION OF EVENTS

18. (SBU) In both East and West Wollega zones, the ruling party succeeded in fielding a candidate for every seat open to competition. With opposition candidates registered for only three one-hundredths of a percent of the seats open for election, ruling party representatives presented themselves as confident yet still angry at the opposition. Ruling OPDO party and zonal government officials in Gimbi and Nekempt universally dismissed opposition party complaints. Despite assurances that party members who breach the EPRDF's Code of Conduct would be severely punished, OPDO West Wollega Zone Chairman Kebebew Teferi claimed that there had never even been a report of such a breach to merit an investigation, much less punishment.

19. (SBU) When pushed, the ruling OPDO party officials acknowledged that they had problems which caused the voter support for the opposition in 2005, but argued that through self-evaluation and a policy shift toward a rural development strategy they had succeeded in winning back public support. Not only did OPDO officers argue that they had re-attracted

the public, but they argued that the opposition had lost its popular base by "offering only lies and hollow promises" to the public. When asked for examples of such hollow promises, however, Ato Kebebew could only cite promises to cut the price of fertilizer or to provide jobs, both functions exclusively controlled by the ruling party controlled local governments. In response to the Ambassador's queries about harassment of the opposition, Senior Advisor the East Wollega zonal administrator Ismael Aba-Garo, in concert with the party's line, argued that the allegations are only rumors and that the opposition was not serious. The Deputy Zonal Administrator for East Wollega further blurred the non-existent lines between the government and party when, in response to the Ambassador's questions as to how the elections would go, refused to provide a response until he could join us in a meeting with the OPDO zonal chairman to address the point.

THE NEB: DON'T ROCK OPDO'S BOAT

¶10. (U) Meetings with NEB officials in Gimbi and Nekempt exposed ruling party-oriented civil servants unwilling to confront or oppose the party to which they owe their jobs. In Gimbi, the NEB had registered 473,000 voters, over 30,000 candidates, and five community election observers for each of the over 500 zonal polling stations. In Nekempt, the NEB had registered over 441,000 voters, 3,935 community observers, and 60,962 candidates for the 60,955 contested seats in 319 kebeles, 17 woredas, one city council, and to by-elections.

¶11. (SBU) Only after pressing him on specific opposition party complaints did Gimbi's zonal NEB coordinator Kebede Bekele (normally a regional labor and social affairs official) acknowledged that there had been complaints, but he quickly dismissed them as unsubstantiated or matters for the police rather than the NEB. Ato Kebede explained away allegations of harassment which have caused opposition candidates to withdraw by arguing that the opposition OFDM candidates are not serious or committed. Nekempt's zonal NEB coordinator Abera Deresa was similarly pro-ruling party in response to the Ambassador's question as to why the OPC would only be able to register four candidates after winning all 12 parliamentary seats for the zone in 2005. Ato Abera (normally a regional agricultural officer) explained that the OPDO's 2005 loss provided the ruling party an incentive to work hard, and that the OPDO had succeeded in reaching the grassroots to gain candidates while the OPC had become blasé since 2005 rendering it incapable of attracting candidates. Ato Abera went on to argue that the people have seen who can and cannot deliver from the past election and was confident

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that voter turnout would be robust. When asked whether the NEB had investigated the round-up of the OPC's 189 intended candidates, Ato Abera danced around the issue stating that the confiscation of the list was irrelevant and the OPC's failure to present the 189 (detained) candidates reflected their lack of commitment to the process.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) It was clear from this trip that two years of harassment, sustained detentions, forced closure of party offices, and intimidation by the ruling party and the administrative offices which they control has left the opposition in disarray, lacking the capacity and organization to actively recruit and work grassroots support. The opposition made a conscious decision before the candidate registration period even began not to field candidates for the tens of thousands of kebele-level assembly seats, choosing to focus instead on the woreda and zone-level seats. In light of the heavy-handed tactics of ruling party cadres, the opposition was overwhelmingly impeded from recruiting candidates even for this, dramatically reduced, number of

seats.

¶13. (C) The visit did poignantly reveal that to develop truly multi-party competitive election campaigns, the opposition will need to be allowed to organize and operate without being impeded by the ruling party. In the Ambassador's twelve years of working on the Horn of Africa, he has never previously encountered the level of deep frustration encountered in discussions with opposition officials, supporters, and even random voters. It is clear that the April 2008 local elections are already a foregone conclusion and that the U.S. and other donors will need to focus on the 2010 national elections, supporting observer training and working with both opposition and ruling party officials to promote dialogue and a transparent, open electoral process. If we are not able to push the ruling party to open political space to the opposition, curtail harassment and blatant intimidation, and provide hope for the opposition to participate credibly in the electoral process without fear of arrest and threats to personal safety, we could well face a scenario in which the serious and deep frustration currently found among the electorate and opposition groups flaring into anti-government violence.

¶14. (C) Anecdotes encountered in western Oromiya of harassment and intimidation by the ruling OPDO party within the ruling EPRDF coalition against the opposition were both pervasive and consistent with those which have reached the capital over the past two years. It is virtually impossible to confirm that party and government cadres are taking such harsh actions under orders from the ruling party's leadership. Certainly, the prospects of a challenge to their own local government jobs and salaries provide ample motive for low level cadre incumbents to make every effort to undermine the opposition. Such too was a problem in the 2005 elections where local kebele cadres brutalized opposition supporters and candidates until ruling party leaders halted some of the excess. The ruling party's apparent refusal to acknowledge, investigate, or hold members accountable for such actions clearly shows that these heavy-handed tactics are, at a minimum, condoned by the OPDO/EPRDF.

¶15. (C) Post has, and will continue, to take every effort to express our concerns over the prevailing political climate and lack of political space in Ethiopia. The negligible presence of opposition candidates for the coming local elections likely will result more in popular resignation than uprising. Without a mechanism to release the mounting anger and frustration, however, sustained ruling party harassment and intimidation will only be peacefully tolerated for so long. And, in west Oromiya, the birthplace of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) insurgency, the unstable current state of cold, tense peace risks erupting before the 2010 national elections if there is not an opening of political space and a genuine freedom to express dissent. End Comment.
YAMAMOTO